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THE TERCENTENARY OF VELASQUEZ.

BY CHARLES WHIBLEY.

THREE hundred years ago was born at Seville the great painter whom Madrid honors to-day. Nor could the Tercentenary have fallen more opportunely, since at the very present time of defeat it serves to emphasize the imperishable glory of the past. As is suggested in the commemorative verse, composed by the Duke de Rivas, the laurels of war no longer adorn the brow of Spain, but neither time nor reverse can ever rob her of Cervantes, now the whole world's heritage, or of Velasquez, that exquisite master who conferred immortality upon a King of supine will and not undisputed grandeur.

And it is but just that these honorable ceremonies should have been celebrated at Madrid, for though Velasquez was a son of Seville, it was at Madrid that he did his work and established his renown. From the time when, young and unknown, he sought the patronage of the King, he never wavered in his allegiance to the capital, and though the demolition of Joseph Bonaparte long since scattered his ashes to the winds of heaven, it was there in the parish Church of San Juan that he was buried. Moreover, it is not only that you may best admire his works in the Museum of the Prado; the atmosphere and color of Madrid are the atmosphere and color of his pictures. Doubtless the city itself has woefully changed since the painter exhibited his first portrait of the King, the first of so many, to the admiration of the Calle Mayor. But time cannot change a landscape nor utterly deform the plan of an ancient city. The Plaza Mayor is to-day much the same as it was when the Inquisitors discharged their grim duties in its midst, and when Prince Charles sat by the Infanta's side in one of its balconies. The blue sky, too, which hangs above the town is eternally inalterable; the parched Manzanares is still the

subject of the ancient jest, the Guadarrama wears to-day the same aspect which it wears in the pictures of Velasquez. Here, too, dwelt the Court, whose dignity the painter celebrated, and whose great men, princes and warriors, he set, immortal and distinguished, upon his canvas. Indeed, there was an obvious appropriateness both in the place and the method of the ceremonies; for it is no *fête* of the people which we have witnessed; rather a punctilious court has done honor to a punctilious courtier.

The life of Velasquez is obscured by the veil of mystery, which is commonly drawn over the greatest men. Of his private sentiments we know nothing; if he cherished any theories concerning the practice of his art, they have not come down to us. We can only arrive at his character by negatives, and we are entitled to the belief that he lived for sixty years without exciting envy, or promoting ill-will. He was so far above the others, that envy was disarmed, and he was so happy in the triumph of his art, that there was no room for malice in his brain. Moreover, he was assuredly of a constant temperament, and not even the fealty which he owed his King persuaded him to turn his back upon the disgraced Olivares, first architect of his fortune. His own portrait, which he painted several times, is more eloquent than the records, and reveals to us a true Spaniard, of rare intelligence and native aristocracy. Spanish in dignity, Spanish in pride, Spanish in reserve—such was Velasquez; and this impression, suggested by our scanty knowledge, is heightened by his familiar aspect. The hair brushed wide over his ears, the noble forehead, the strongly-marked eyebrows, the arrogant mouth—these are the tokens of a hero rarely endowed, a hero whom we may worship with humility—who after three centuries still confers glory upon his fatherland, and wins for a country, humiliated in war, the constant respect of the whole world.

But while Velasquez the painter is revealed only in his works, we can follow the career of Velasquez the courtier from the moment when he arrived unfriended in Madrid, until he returned for the last time to the capital, weary and ill. It was his great good fortune—and truly he was fortunate in all things—to win the admiration, the devotion even, of Philip IV. Now, Philip the Great was neither a discreet statesman nor a valiant general. He mounted the throne when the Moors, the wisest blood of Spain, had been driven from the country. He witnessed disaster after

disaster with the serene resignation which is still his nation's birthright. Portugal renounced her allegiance; the Catalans revolted with the obstinate independence which has always distinguished them; Naples with no better leader than the madman, Masaniello, threw off the yoke; yet the Spanish King, shorn of his Empire, lost neither his pride nor his grandeur. If he could not triumph in war, he might still be glorious in peace; and so, closing his eyes in characteristic insolence to ruin, he conducted the life of the Court with a grave splendor and serene magnificence which were not equalled even in the France of the Great King. The life of Madrid was not gay, since austerity governed the Monarch, who was never known to laugh; but it was grandiose, and its very fanaticism was informed with a kind of elegance. To this Court, then, Velasquez came, young and untried, nor did he wait long for promotion. The King appointed him instantly his own privileged painter, who alone should be permitted to portray the royal features, and the Prado is all the richer to-day for the King's restriction. Indeed, whatever be said of Philip's rule, it is certain that he was a patron of genius. Under his auspices, all the arts were widely and generously encouraged. The drama of Spain touched its golden age; poets were honored not merely for their sugared sonnets of official compliments. And Velasquez, that he might pursue his craft in peace, was lifted above the necessity of competition; he received a pension, and had his studio in the Alcazar, where the King visited him at his pleasure, and kept his own separate chair; moreover he was promoted with all possible speed; his emoluments were doubled, his dignity increased; now he is appointed Usher of the Court, now he receives the crowning compliment of all, and is styled *Aposentador*, or Lord Chamberlain. Nor were his duties ever humiliating; on the contrary they were such as could best be discharged by an artist; it was for him to arrange pageants, and to design processions, and one can imagine with what admirable skill he grouped the crowds and spaced the soldiers. In his hands truly, the great personages who did honor to King and Court must have become mere details in a vast and splendid composition; and here again Philip displayed a royal wisdom. For once at least in the world's history a supreme artist moved men and women as the materials of a delicate, if transitory, art.

But while the King employed Velasquez for the embellish-

ment of his own dignity, he did not forget his favorite's advantages, and treated him, while still under thirty, as the great painter of Spain. When Rubens visited Madrid with all the prestige, not only of his art, but of England, whose emissary he was, Velasquez was deputed to display for his delight the royal treasures. Together, the painters visited the King's Gallery and the Escorial; for once the Spaniard surrendered his privilege, and the Fleming was permitted to paint the portrait of Philip; unhappily the letters which passed between the two are lost, and we are forced to fall back upon the ancient tradition, which declares that they met in reciprocal esteem, and parted without influencing each other. But what a theme is here for an Imaginary Conversation! What a splendid foil for the luxury and magnificence of Rubens must have seemed the sedate tranquillity of Velasquez! And if Rubens had nothing to teach his colleague, at least he persuaded him that Italy was the cradle of the arts; and presently, under the auspices of Philip, Velasquez set forth upon the first of his pilgrimages. How he travelled to Milan with Spinola, whom he afterward made glorious in "*The Lances*;" how he was received everywhere with the respect due to himself and to his King; how he was lodged in the Villa Medici, where he painted his enchanting landscapes; how he turned aside to make the portrait of the Infanta Maria—all these are twice-told tales. And he returned from his journey the same master of style and vision that he set out. Italy quickened his admiration, but left him in the serene possession of himself. Once more in Madrid, he resumed his place at Court, painted the masterpieces, which are now the wonder of Europe, and went not abroad again for nineteen years; then he paid his second visit to Italy, where he collected pictures for the royal gallery, and painted the ever-renowned portrait of Pope Innocent. But when he would have passed over into France, Philip, who was not wont thus to betray the emotion of friendship, recalled him to Spain, and he never approached nearer to the Kingdom of Louis XIV. than the Isle of Pheasants. Here it was that he achieved his last triumph on the world's stage. He designed the splendid *fêtes* which celebrated the betrothal of the Great Monarch to Maria Theresa. The pamphlets of the time give us but a blurred picture of this grandiose spectacle, which imagination is powerless to construct. But no master of the ceremonies ever had a greater occasion for the exercise of his skill. The two monarchs, for

whom pageantry was a fiercer necessity than conquest, met in amiable rivalry, and it was Velasquez who set the scene and rang up the curtain. But the tedious journey was too severe a strain upon the painter's strength, and he regained Madrid merely to die. His work was done, his fame forever secure, and Spain mourned the loss of her greatest citizen. The King, who masked his feelings as he masked his face, and who witnessed the loss of provinces without a murmur, could not contemplate in silence the loss of his beloved painter. "*Estoy abatido*," "I am cast down," he wrote in the margin of a despatch, and it would be difficult to compose a more eloquent confession of grief.

It is for this reason, then, because he was himself a courtier, that Velasquez was most properly honored in the seclusion of the Court. A *fête de famille*, the journals called it with perhaps a spice of bitterness. And the bitterness is unjustified, since, as has been said, the people of Spain have but a moderate appreciation of Velasquez. In the popular judgment, Murillo is the greater glory of the country. The Court phrase that while Velasquez was the painter of earth, Murillo was the painter of heaven, sufficiently explains the common confusion of idea. It explains also the great master's lofty exclusiveness. But Velasquez was something yet more exclusive than a courtier. He was a Knight of the most noble Order of Santiago, and those who are to-day honored with the uniform which once he wore paid their proper tribute of respect to his memory. Their solemn requiem carried the spectator far back into the past, and showed how closely linked is the great chain of tradition. The Church itself was a noble background—with its green and white walls, and its mysterious grilles, behind which fluttered mysteriously the ghostly sisterhood. Then entered the Knights, robed in white, each bearing on his breast the red cross of the Order, and carrying a lighted candle in his hand. So was conducted a solemn service for the dead, and as the voices of the unseen choir chanted the Mass of Velasquez' own time, as the Archbishop sprinkled the robe of the dead Knight with holy water, you might have been transported yourself to the seventeenth century, a pious witness of the painter's funeral. And the solemnity was enhanced by the reflection that the Order of Santiago, of nobles all composed, was celebrating the august memory of the only Knight who ever wore its cross without a true patent of nobility.

For rumor says, and if the rumor be not true, at least it is the symbol of truth, that when Velasquez had finished "*Las Meninas*," the King declared that one thing only was needed for its perfection: the cross of Santiago upon the painter's breast; and instantly he demanded this supreme honor for Velasquez. But first the painter was asked to prove his noble birth, and the letter, written with his own hand, wherein he sets forth his genealogy, may to-day be seen in the Museum of the Prado. His genealogy might have been sufficient, and he had no difficulty in declaring that he had never worked for money. When he painted Pope Innocent, he refused reward on the ground that the King his Master paid him sufficiently. "I have never painted," said he in an immortal phrase, "save for my own amusement and to obey my King." Never was there a prouder expression of the artistic conscience; yet it was not enough to satisfy the punctilio of Spain. The forefathers of Velasquez had not been exempt from a certain tax, which the nobility was never asked to pay; wherefore his claim was rejected, and he might only enter the distinguished order by dispensation of the Pope. This dispensation of course was readily granted, and so the Knighthood of to-day was privileged to pay a tribute of respect to its greatest member.

If the King and the Court honored the painter, the painter more than repaid the debt incurred. For he told on his eloquent canvas the whole history of his time. There in the newly-rearranged gallery hang the elegant, distinguished portraits of Kings, Princes, Statesmen, Soldiers, Scholars, Poets and Dwarfs. All that was great and picturesque in the greatest and most picturesque of Courts is portrayed with insight and fidelity. Philip IV. looks gravely out from many a pompous frame. There rides the Conde-Duque, in all the arrogance of untrammelled power, a fitting minister for so ornate a King; there Don Carlos prances on his fat horse, and the demure Fernando contemplates the chase. And there in another corner squat or stand those amazing dwarfs, who made solemn mirth in the sedatest of palaces, with whom Velasquez took his place at the bull-fights of the Plaza Mayor, and who were great enough to inhabit palaces of their own. And there in the centre hangs the glorious "*Lanzas*," exquisite in color, magnificent in arrangement, the noblest epic ever sung of war, wherein you know not which to admire the more ardently, the victor's gesture of loyal compassion, or the proud humility of the

conquered. Thus it is that heroes meet in combat; thus it is that gentlemen accept the ordinance of fate, and as Velasquez has shown in how noble a spirit Spinola endured his triumph, so his countrymen to-day have shown with what a tranquil resignation they can accept defeat. And there in the solitude of a chamber apart smiles "*Las Meninas*," the supreme glory of the Court, the last triumph of human vision and delicate design. The scene is so intimately realized, that the spectator seems to bear his part in the sumptuous comedy, to stand for an instant within the Alcazar itself. And the divine "*Hilanderas*," whose work-girls are posed like Greek statues, and the solemn "*Christ*," and that lofty interpretation of common life, "*Los Borrachos*"—these too are resplendent upon the walls of the Prado. In Madrid then, and in Madrid alone, you may contemplate the real achievement of Velasquez, an achievement which no disaster may diminish, no defeat annihilate.

There are some men whose grandeur cannot be expressed, the beauty of whose work may not be discussed. The most that can be said of them is that they are *there*. There is Shakespeare, there is Velasquez; and Velasquez is the more fortunate, because while photography is his sole dishonor, Shakespeare may be mangled in every barn. The misunderstanding which has overtaken him is unimportant, and passes in a breath. He has been called a realist, and with a perfect injustice. For realism is the vice of the quality—reality; and if Velasquez is always real, never once does he appear realistic. The truth for its own sake meant nothing to him; only he was better skilled than any man that ever lived to detect in truth what is beautiful. While he sojourned in Seville, he informed with dignity the people of the street; when he reached Madrid, he saw in the King's palace whatever was noble and of good report. And he evoked these splendid images, because he was above all a man of his epoch; he did not return to the traditions of the schools or to the worn-out habits of his craft. He belonged to no school; he came from nowhere. He was not the pupil of this man or that—he was himself. He opened a fresh eye upon a magnificent world, and those pictures which he saw he transcribed with a faithful delicacy. When you look at the great works of the great Italians, you feel that they were painted; when you gaze at the masterpieces of Velasquez, you know only that he saw. In other words, his portraits

are not so much pictures, as veritable personages, but personages purged of failure and stupidity, personages set in such an atmosphere as only a clairvoyant could imagine, and posed with a dignity only possible to a great master of the ceremonies.

Nor is there in his works any suggestion of strain or labor. He does not strive nor cry. An absence of effort characterizes the least of his pictures, and the refinement of his method is so exquisite that the spectator loses even the sense of his material. Palette and brushes are far away, and nought remains but an impression, which seems to have been wafted through the eye to the painter's brain, and then blown upon the canvas. And this very discretion has persuaded even his own countrymen to underrate him. His last biographer, a painter and a Spaniard, denies him imagination, and finds his color at fault. But so fine a colorist was he, that by the simplest means he could produce an effect, which escapes forever those who are more lavish with their paint. And his was the true imagination, which works within the boundaries of its art. The religious commonplaces of Murillo were easier to find than the single pose, for instance, which perfectly suits the contour of a dwarf. Had Velasquez desired to amuse the common mind with fables, there were a thousand fables ready to his hand. But his imagination was too select for illustration, since like a true classic he spent his fancy rather in expression than in the choice of a subject. Yet how admirably, with how fine a sense of poetry he treated the subjects which he chose! For assuredly he was a classic in the sense that Virgil was a classic, and it is not extravagant to believe that he mixed in his veins some drops of Latin blood. Seneca and Lucan, true classics both, came from no further away than Cordova, and who knows but some remote ancestor of Velasquez was a citizen of Rome, and a willing slave to the great tradition, which passed from Athens even to the distant peninsula.

A single grievance remains to be answered. Velasquez, say his detractors, was a courtier, and the detractors do not speak the word in compliment. Yet surely it is an ignorance of history which persuades men to blame a painter for accepting the generous gift of independence. The hero who painted for his own amusement and to obey the King knew not the fear of degrading his art. He at least would never debase the august currency. If he owed loyalty to the King, he kept his conscience for himself,

and never stooped to flatter a vain and anxious purchaser. How much better was the ancient than the modern method! When Velasquez exhibited a picture, he set it alone in the Calle Mayor for all the world to admire; and he was rewarded with the pious verses of the poets. The painters of to-day must struggle like gentlemen in an ignoble crowd for a place upon a common wall, where the vulgar blaze of vivid color cries down their more modest refinement. No, it is the fiercest sin of democracy that it has rendered the real patron impossible. The collector, who has painfully heaped up his hoard of gold wants what he esteems full value for his money, and no doubt he gets it, but let him not flatter his pride that his is an encouragement of art. Truly the patron of old performed a noble duty. Philip IV., of course, had no hand in the making of Velasquez; but Velasquez would not have been precisely the master whom we know had not Philip opened the palace door.

Fortunate in his life from the moment he entered Madrid, fortunate in his work, which was only interrupted by the honorable fatigues of the Court, fortunate also in his temperament, which made him anxious for the success of others, Velasquez still wears his sovereignty like a flower. After three centuries he is serenely fresh in his majesty, and happy, even, in that he has left no school. Who, indeed, shall copy perfection or mimic the achievement of pure artistry? A glance at the modern painters of Spain, whose skill is incontestable, and who possess all the virtues save restraint, proves how easily he guards his Kingship. And the tribute paid him at this tercentenary is as simple as he could have wished it. No new pictures are added to the collection. Only the masterpieces, which have long been the glory of Madrid, are gathered into one room, simply arranged and quietly decorated. There for the first time the art of Velasquez tells its continuous story, and there doubtless will pass thousands of pilgrims in respectful admiration. Above all Madrid has proved that she knows how to pay an appropriate tribute to one who was not only the greatest of her painters, but a distinguished courtier and a noble Knight of the Order of Santiago. And the world which looks on may reflect that, in thus honoring her heroes and country, she confers the highest honor upon herself.

CHARLES WHIBLEY.